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News

Amid redistricting uncertainty, Ohio pulls state legislative races from May primary ballot

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Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose, seen here in a 2020 file photo, ordered county board of elections to remove state legislative races from the May primary ballot. Republicans are hoping a federal court will override the Ohio Supreme Court and restore the maps. (AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar) AP



COLUMBUS, Ohio -- Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose, the state's top elections official, has ordered county boards of election to remove state legislative races from the ballot for the upcoming May primary due to the ongoing legal fight over redrawing the district maps.

LaRose, a Republican, issued the order Wednesday night, nearly a week after the Ohio Supreme Court rejected maps state Republicans approved on Feb. 24. A majority of the court, with Republican Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor joining the court's three Democrats, found the map unconstitutionally slanted in favor of Republicans, the third time the court had done so. The court has cited new anti-gerrymandering rules voters approved in 2015 that for the first time creates political standards the maps must meet.

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The Ohio Redistricting Commission is working to redraw the maps and has until the Monday deadline. It's unclear whether the commission will complete its work in time -- on Wednesday, commission members met for the first time with two out-of-state mapmakers, hired in response to criticism from the court, and approved the rules the mapmakers will follow.

Work on drawing the maps will begin Thursday. Meanwhile, Republicans also are pushing a federal lawsuit to override the state court with hearings scheduled over the next week.

Democrats and voting-rights groups, meanwhile, have pushed Republicans to delay the election to buy the redistricting process more time, and have said Republicans refuse to do so to help their legal efforts.

In an interview Wednesday, LaRose said the state legislative races could be restored on the ballot -- it would involve elections workers giving voters a separate page with only state legislative candidates -- if the federal court were to rule in Republicans'

favor soon enough. Otherwise, the ballots would contain statewide, local candidates and issues and congressional candidates, although the status of Ohio's congressional map is unsettled for reasons similar to those affecting the state legislative races.

Court hearings are scheduled for the Republican-backed federal lawsuit on Friday and next Wednesday.

LaRose gave an estimate of Thursday, March 31 as the hard cut-off date by which the federal court would have to act to get the state legislative races back on the May ballot. Absentee ballots are supposed to go out by April 5.

"I hate to pick a hard date, because it's about me talking with the different boards of election and finding out how quickly they can print and mail those ballots," LaRose said.

Otherwise, if the federal court either rejects the Republican lawsuit or fails to act in time for the May election, the state legislative races would have to be rescheduled for a second primary election on another date, with Republicans lately preferring August.

Besides state legislative races, LaRose's Wednesday decision also affects races for the elected state central committees for the Ohio Republican Party and the Ohio Democratic Party.

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